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ABSTRACT

The conference method has a long history as a way of teaching, problem solving, information sharing, and conflict resolving. There are two methods of planning conferences: a systematic and organized method, and an informal method. Central to estimating the success of a conference is evaluation. In the evaluation process, obtaining information consistent with stated objectives is an essential first step, a task which frequently necessitates a full-time evaluator. To determine the full effect of the conference on all participants, it is advisable to include all participants in the evaluation process. Though expensive and time consuming, evaluation readily reimburses initial planning costs. The various symptoms of inadequate evaluation, for instance, low re-enrollments, high dropout rates, and employer complaints, often contribute to the neglect of evaluation. Obstacles to evaluation include: difficulty in appraising behavior change, lack of comparative data, financial constraints, and unclear or unspecific objectives. Methods and techniques for evaluating a conference involve initial construction of a plan and utilization of valid and reliable evaluation instruments. Evaluators themselves must determine the combination of before, during, and after conference instruments appropriate for the purposes desired. (JR)

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Conference Evaluation: Pro or Con

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Abstract

Conference evaluation, as with other forms of test and measurement, requires adequate resources, both personal and financial. In many instances various individuals involved in a conference perceive its values differently. This is therefore one of the main objectives in conference evaluation.

The evaluation process is different things to different people. Program planners, participants and sponsors need to be considered when designing evaluation. Conference evaluation is undertaken to improve the operation of an organization, or perhaps to determine the relevance of a program to aspirations of participants.

Designing an evaluation warrants consideration to the following:

- What to evaluate
- Relating objectives and evaluation
- Management of the evaluation process
- Who should conduct evaluation
- What does evaluation accomplish
- What are symptoms of inadequate evaluation and why is it neglected
- What are obstacles and hurdles to evaluation
- What are common methods and techniques employed in conference evaluation.

Evaluation must be considered in initial planning and requires total commitment from planning committees, and/or sponsors, participants and employers. A lack of enthusiasm and belief in its value will force it to appear superficial.

INTRODUCTION

Teachers and instructors devote substantial periods of time developing tests, examinations, and diverse methods for evaluating their efforts. Conference planners, in like manner, concentrate effort to "evaluation" to improve and analyze the programs for their older and more mature conferees.

Conferences, if operated efficiently, can bring the greatest satisfaction to a coordinator. Likewise, a poorly evaluated conference does little to support the planning process. Consequently, it is vital that a conference director or coordinator recognize that evaluation is continually in operation and guard against possible weaknesses.

Of special note to this paper are the history and growth of conferences, defining evaluation, its purposes, who it assists, and how results are utilized.

HISTORY AND DEFINITION

An origin of the conference method is unknown but the oldest method of teaching, as presently perceived, was accomplished by a conference. The Socratic method was in reality a form of conference discussion. Historic vocational education movements also were, in essence, conference methods, the most significant being the work of Froebel and Pestalozzi. In practice, the conference is basically a vocational education venture, seeking improvement of participants' competencies or development of untapped personal resources.

According to H. Leroy Marlow (1963),

A conference in its purest sense is an informal, yet planned meeting of experienced people with related interests and common problems, who through discussion pool their ideas and strive for a solution.

Obviously, conferences are conducted for diverse purposes; the most predominant being problem solving, information sharing, policy development, resolution of conflict, discussion of a mutual area or specific problem.

Familiarity with conference planning is essential and includes:

The conscious and deliberate guidance of thinking to create logical means for achieving commonly agreed upon goals. Planning always and inevitably sets priorities and calls for the value judgments. The alternative to plan is no plan (Treacher, 1950).

As compared to the systematic and organized previous definition, conference planning often is undertaken by a more informal approach defined as:

Unorganized, unplanned work of a few individuals in assuming to recognize the wants and desires of potential participants. Perhaps a few participants will attend, but quite often by happenstance. Perhaps a few objectives will be met, but often by chance.

This second approach is based on assumptions of "what is best" for participants. Supplementally, speakers and topics are selected with no consideration of desires or needs of participants. Disadvantages are numerous and evident; comprehensive evaluation is impossible; a majority of potential participants are ignored and quite often the conference is a financial blunder.

CONFERENCE COMPONENTS

Aspirations of the conference planner, along with objectives of a conference, are the major components of conference planning. The inclusion of these components is vital to potential participants and the planner. A conference should aspire to satisfy expectations and objectives of participants. An additional major component common to planning and participants is evaluation.

Incorporating aspiration of participants in any conference must include:

1. Identifying a common interest or need. This is vital in planning procedures, for it is necessary to generate a relevant theme.
2. Developing topics, issues, or questions which the conference will discuss.
3. Establishing and clarifying objectives.
4. Selecting appropriate speakers, films, materials, etc., which assist participants in meeting stated objectives.

5. Evaluating program, through various methods and techniques, to determine conference success.

THE EVALUATION PROCESS

Conclusions, pro or con, will be fabricated regarding personal satisfaction from attending a conference. Participants, speakers, and coordinators will decide, according to individual criteria, conference effectiveness. It is inappropriate to ask, "Shall we evaluate?" A more appropriate question is, "How and to what extent should we evaluate to improve the conference?"

Informally, conference evaluation is what participants say to each other about the speaker as they leave a workshop session and return to their occupations. What a participant reports to his boss upon returning to the job is evaluation. Evaluation is what people state on the evaluation instrument; it is their professional behavior three months or a year following the conference. Evaluation in total is an appraisal by participants, speakers and planners at the conclusion of a conference.

A formal definition, as stated by Knowles (1970), applicable to many phases of adult education states:

...evaluation has two principle purposes: 1) Improvement of organization operation, including such aspects as its planning process, structure, decision-making procedure, personnel, physical facilities, public relations, and administration and management. 2) Improvement of the program, including such aspects as objectives, clientele, methods and techniques, materials and quality of learning outcomes.

Evaluation can also be used for such secondary purposes as defense against attack, justification for expansion, support for the status quo, boosting of morale, personnel appraisal and promotion, and institutional reorganization.

Nathan C. Shaw (1969) emphasized collection and analysis of data in terms of conference effectiveness.

Logical queries emerge: What is evaluated in a conference? For what reasons do participants attend a conference? Participants attend for a number of reasons, the least of which may be professional improvement. It may be to improve their knowledge of a subject, to receive information pertaining to their job, or because a superior has encouraged attendance and is paying all expenses. It may be an attempt on the part of the participant to "get away" from the present job responsibilities or from the spouse. It could be to "search" for a new employer while being financed by the present boss. Reasons for attendance are any number of social reasons, excluding job improvement.

This diversity for attendance creates problems for conference evaluation. The evaluator must now be concerned with such aspects as are included in the "happiness" area rather than programmatic concerns. Were you "happy" with motel-hotel, transportation, food, physical facilities; were chairs comfortable, lighting adequate, etc.? These items are of minor concern, for they seem insignificant in terms of the purpose of a conference. Dissatisfaction with these "happiness" items could reduce attendance at a future conference. Their evaluation is useful, keeping in proper perspective the weight of their measures.

WHAT TO EVALUATE

What is evaluated in a conference? Obtaining information consistent with stated objectives is an essential first step. Evaluation from this perspective requires varied operations. Lindeman (1953) analyzes the consequence as:

1. Stating objectives of a group or planning committee in specific terms so that evidence of the degree to which objectives are being achieved can be obtained.
2. Securing evidence of the degree to which objectives are being achieved.
3. Securing facts regarding what is being done to achieve objectives.

4. Developing ideas about what factors might be helping or hindering achievement of objectives.
5. Developing and trying out methods of remedying weaknesses in conferences.

In relation to the first consequence, and outlined by Mager (1962), an objective attempts to accomplish:

...an intent communicated by a statement describing a proposed change in a learner--a statement of what the learner is to be like when he successfully completes a learning experience. Objectives of a training program must denote measurable attributes observable in the graduate of the program, or otherwise it is impossible to determine whether or not the program is meeting the objectives.

Absence of clearly stated objectives complicates evaluation. Consequently, it is difficult to select speakers, materials, and a method of instruction. Precisely stated objectives assist the participant, for they allow self-assessment of individual progress related to anticipated needs. Advance dissemination of conference objectives allows participants to decide the benefit of attendance. If possible, this information should be included with pre-registration material.

Mager (1962) states that essential characteristics of objectives are:

First, they identify the terminal behavior by name; we can specify the kind of behavior which will be accepted as evidence that the learner has achieved the objective. Second, try further to define the desired behavior by describing the important conditions under which the behavior will be expected to occur. Third, specify the criteria of acceptable performance by describing how well the learner must perform to be considered acceptable.

It is important to emphasize that objectives define performance characteristics and anticipated accomplishment.

In addition to stated objectives, latent objectives offer potential and/or resistance to evaluation. Participants have objectives for attending. There are social objectives that deal with the relationship of the conference to

personal improvements. Non-educational objectives seek to improve the organizational image or membership. Speakers have objectives; they may include discussion of a new theory or participants' reaction to a point of view. Excessive effort by a planning committee on latent objectives should be discouraged. A poorly planned conference could satisfy latent objectives and show little regard for educational objectives. Conference planners, when developing educational objectives, must react to the following:

1. Are objectives specific enough to serve as a base for evaluation?
2. Are objectives perceived similarly by all concerned?
3. Do objectives correspond to needs of participants?
4. How will participant behavior be modified if objectives are met?
5. Are objectives limited and can they be accomplished in time allotted?

To insure relationship of objectives to evaluation, a full-time evaluator is useful and often essential. This individual should have responsibilities in initial planning of the conference, as well as relating objectives to the nature and scope of evaluation design.

RELATING OBJECTIVES AND EVALUATION

A difficulty encountered when reacting to the five concerns above is failing to state objectives specifically. Ambiguous objectives complicate measuring change in participants' behavior. The initial link between objectives and evaluation occurs when the planning committee outlines what is to be accomplished in the conference. Anticipated changes may involve personal characteristics, knowledge, or perceptions and attitudes. Changes may occur with participants' role performance; being a better worker, being more cooperative and understanding of the job. Of necessity, it is important for evaluator, planning committee and participants that logic for establishing

conference objectives be clearly understood and all are knowledgeable of possible outcomes.

MANAGEMENT OF THE EVALUATION PROCESS

The following questions remain:

1. Who should be assigned to conduct evaluation?
2. What does evaluation accomplish, what are its outcomes, and how are results utilized?
3. What are symptoms of inadequate evaluation and why is it often neglected?
4. What are common obstacles or hurdles to evaluation?
5. What are methods and techniques utilized in conference evaluation?

WHO SHOULD EVALUATE

Ideally, one individual or group should be assigned to evaluation. Costs related to this model are expensive and therefore seldom implemented. Therefore, every individual related to conference planning or implementation in a position to make judgments about a conference should be involved. Concerning participants as evaluators, Lindeman (1953) points out:

If an individual takes part in discovering the effects of an activity in which he has a part and then helps to work out plans for improving the activity, he is likely to:

- ...have confidence in the evaluation process,
- ...understand what effects his own work has on the success of the activity,
- ...originate or accept suggestions for improving his work, and
- ...be willing to make changes or to learn to make changes that seem desirable.

In addition to participants, other evaluators might include: speakers at the conference, employers of participants, community representatives, and special consultants.

Each group perceives a conference as accomplishing purposes unique to itself and thus each group perceives evaluation differently. Including all groups will provide diverse reactions and will incorporate aspects from conference pre-planning to application of presented information.

WHAT DOES IT ACCOMPLISH

Evaluation is expensive and time consuming but yet it is vital and should not be overshadowed for cost factors. It will quite easily reimburse initial planning cost. A basic accomplishment is assessment of anticipated results and outcomes. Evaluation should assist in planning a future conference. Non-programmatic items such as accommodations, meals, transportation, physical facilities can be enhanced through evaluation. Evaluation will identify those areas in which a conference was strong, as well as areas in need of improvement. A majority of areas in need of improvement indicates additional planning and development are in order.

Possible results from evaluation include an altered format from lecture to discussion, utilization of audiovisual and handouts; or objectives could be altered to respond to changing needs and interests of participants. Information from evaluation could promote the sponsoring organization. Perhaps the organization is unaware of problems and a conference evaluation could uncover these. Thus, the organization may determine initial conference planning to be inadequate and insufficient and recognize a need for additional planning.

A final act of accomplishment is reporting conference proceedings, by evaluators, to the general public and to participants. This reporting may include recommendations for future action or a summation of findings from the evaluation. An important concern is that it is unbiased and fair.

SYMPTOMS OF INADEQUATE EVALUATION AND WHY IT IS NEGLECTED

Symptoms of inadequate evaluation are diverse. According to Shaw (1969), major symptoms of inadequate evaluation include:

Low re-enrollments in re-occurring conferences.

Difficulty in attracting participants from specific populations.

A high dropout rate during a conference.

Complaints from employers of participants regarding obsolescences of knowledge or skills presented at a conference.

The inability of participants to apply what has been presented to an actual situation.

A lack of financial support from policy makers regarding budget requests and proposals for future conferences.

Symptoms of inadequate evaluation often relate to its neglect. Reasons for this neglect might include:

1. A feeling that there is nothing worth evaluating.
2. Program objectives were poorly constructed and difficult to evaluate.
3. The conference sponsor is lethargic and does not wish to commit the required resources.
4. The conference could be criticized if results are insignificant and little value is realized.

OBSTACLES AND HURDLES TO EVALUATION

The true value of a conference is its effect on participants. Conferences are to produce change in knowledge, attitudes, conduct, or thinking. A conference is not to control thinking but rather to influence thinking or actions of participants. A participant realizes reasons for attendance and will judge the success of a conference accordingly. Participants observe their colleagues and their changed behavior, make comparisons, and discuss the conference. Thus, behavior, comparisons, and discussions cause difficulty

in evaluation. It is possible to evaluate satisfaction with physical arrangements and facilities and inquire if the conference has satisfied needs. It is a laborious task to evaluate total behavior change, participant comparisons, and subsequent discussions.

Evaluation is not synonymous with measurement for measurement involves comparison. Evaluation is often a one-time event and a base of comparison does not exist.

A third obstacle to evaluation is financial. To be comprehensive, evaluation requires a commitment from decision makers. Therefore, a frequent excuse is it costs too much. In reality, the true reason may be fear of uncovering shortcomings in conference planning. Hurdles for Evaluation (1953) discusses skepticism as an obstacle to evaluation. Misapplications of evaluation which create this skepticism are:

1. Time devoted to evaluation is spent not in improving the program planning and performance, but in defending the program to appease outside interests which may be viewed as hostile to purposes and standards.
2. Evaluation may be utilized as a way to eliminate "inefficient" workers, program areas, or to justify retrenchment in the budget. This area is especially applicable to a planning committee.
3. Perhaps participants have put serious effort and time into self-examination of what the conference has accomplished for them only to find the time wasted when the evaluation report is filed away and forgotten.

A poor commitment of time to comprehensive evaluation only supports this skepticism and reinforces personal attitudes and threats.

A final obstacle is unclear and non-specific objectives. A participant cannot evaluate a conference if objectives are not clearly stated and understood. In order to evaluate the value of a conference, he must perceive the change in behavior; this is accomplished through objectives.

Evaluation must be discussed and planned, must have support from policy makers, participants, and speakers, and must be utilized in an efficient and practical manner rather than filed and forgotten.

METHODS AND TECHNIQUES OF CONFERENCE EVALUATION

Methods and techniques for evaluating a conference involve initial construction of a plan. It is essential for evaluation to be included as planning proceeds. Planning includes clearly stated objectives. Thus, objectives might determine methods and techniques. Clearly stated objectives are easier to evaluate and construction of instruments to accomplish this is facilitated.

Basic problems are encountered in development of instruments. Miller and McGuire (1961) state the most common problems as being:

1. Finding or constructing the most convenient and economical instrument that will elicit responses which bear close relation to the behavior that could be expected from a participant in a non-test situation.
2. Considerable variation in the amount of change which the conference can reasonably expect to achieve due to varied experiences of participants.
3. An enormous range of specific content involved in a conference and each participant may respond differently.
4. Participants at a conference do not expect to be evaluated and thus may exhibit resistance to the idea.

An evaluator, working with a planning committee, can best eliminate or minimize these problems. Being alert to problems in construction and implementation of evaluation will be reduced and its effectiveness increased with employment of evaluation staff.

Validity and reliability are of concern to conference evaluation. The instrument or process must be valid and accomplish its intended purpose. It must be reliable and supply consistent data from participants.

Evaluation occurs at three distinct periods or in any combination of the three: 1) before the conference, 2) during the conference, and 3) after the conference. Each period allows for specific aspects of evaluation. Utilization of pre-conference evaluation allows for pre-test and post-test sessions. This is often the most advantageous, for it allows a study of behavior prior to and subsequent to participation.

Evaluation during a conference allows for periodic on-site checks of attitude. Within this period, material is easily recalled by participants and they can state immediate reactions.

Post-conference evaluation is most widely accepted. It allows participants to evaluate the conference in relation to job situations and allows the opportunity to evaluate change in behavior as related to conference objectives. An employer's observation of behavior of the participant following attendance is also post-conference.

Specific methods best lend themselves to specific periods. Methods most commonly employed are:

- Questionnaires sent to participants (Pre-test and Post-test)
- Sample interviews
- Follow-up local meetings
- Reports from participants' local organizations
- Reports from field staff
- Interviews with participants' colleagues
- Interviews with participants' employers
- Reports of the evaluation committee
- Post-conference meeting with conference committees.

Each method has advantages or disadvantages and variables such as number of participants, conference format, nature of material presented, and available resources must be considered in selection of appropriate methods.

Research, investigation, and experience will support the contention that no standard exists for selecting a most acceptable method of evaluation. Material by Kempfer (1948), Knowles (1966), and Uramech (1966) provides

examples of evaluation instruments appropriate for conferences, but only the evaluator can determine which system or method is most appropriate.

SUMMATION

The conference method of instruction and presentation in adult education is not questioned. A conference can easily be prepared and implemented, but the value of all preparation and planning is measured through effective evaluation.

Evaluation must be considered in initial planning, and requires total commitment from planning committees and/or sponsors, participants, and employees. A lack of commitment and belief in its value will force it to appear as superficial.

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Appendix A

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